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in inmate killing
B2

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Whitesbog celebrates annual Blueberry Festival

By **MARK ZIMMARO**
STAFF WRITER

PEMBERTON TOWNSHIP — Blueberries were everywhere on Saturday.

Whether they were sold by the pint, baked into cakes and pies, or sprinkled on an ice cream sundae, the state's official fruit was out in all forms during the 28th Annual Whitesbog Blueberry Festival at the Historic Whitesbog Village.

Thousands of people flocked to the secluded site off Burlington County Route 530 to show their love for the fruit that was first cultivated at Whitesbog nearly 100 years ago.

"I've never been here before," said Jen Huege of Mount Laurel, who brought her 3-year-old daughter Jody. "It looked fun and just seemed like a really cool thing to do."

Visitors had the chance to

visit dozens of vendors selling unique items while bluegrass bands belted out tunes on the main stage.

Midway through the festival, a pie eating contest for children stole the center spotlight.

"It was really fun and the pie was really good," said Alice Belskis, 11, of Evesham.

Belskis was one of the first children to finish her slice of blueberry pie in the no-hands contest. She shared the winners' circle with a handful of children including Andrew Dudinetz, 11, of Southampton and Andrew Martinis, 9, of Clementon.

"It was my second time winning," Martinis said proudly. "I can't wait to come back next year."

Visitors could take tours of the historic village's

See **FESTIVAL**, Page **B6**

Festival

Continued from Page B1

buildings that were built sometime between 1890 and 1925. The workers' cottages, a barrel factory and the home of Elizabeth White were all open and available to people interested in learning about the cultivation of the first blueberry.

Once tours were finished, most people wrapped up their day with some fresh blueberries or a blueberry-themed treat.

"This is delicious," said Shirley Heine of Manchester as she sampled a blueberry sundae outside the General Store.

Heine and fellow Manchester resident Jack Smolow returned to the festival this year after they were unable to attend last year.

"The food and entertainment are great," Heine said. "It's a great place to be."

Smolow agreed.

"They could use some more places to sit down," Smolow said. "Other than that, it's a

great time."

Shuttle buses shipped groups of people from the offsite parking spaces as 16 volunteer members of the New Jersey Youth ChalleNGe Academy based out of Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst guided traffic.

"The kids have been working really hard parking cars since 7:30 a.m.," Group supervisor Cecelia Cathers said. "The people here have been pleasant even though they've had to wait for buses a while. Everyone has been awesome and it was a beautiful day for a festival."

Whitesbog Volunteer John Nallinger said blueberry sales were "brisk" as hundreds stockpiled fresh blueberries before heading home.

"We have been through quite a few crates of blueberries," Nallinger said as volunteer Cody Boggess, 13, of Browns Mills rang up another sale. "These blueberries are good, made right here in Browns Mills and packaged in Hammonton. People are always asking that."

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Gabrielle Miehle, 12, of Pemberton Township, goes head-first into some blueberry pie Saturday during the children's pie-eating contest at the 28th annual Whitesbog Blueberry Festival in Pemberton Township.